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NUMBER 5

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

HOLY CITY OF MARS *by* RALPH M. FARLEY  
AL P. NELSON

# fantastic

## ADVENTURES

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PAGES



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### DAUGHTER OF THE SNAKE GOD

*By* WILLIAM P. McGIVERN *and* JOHN YORK CABOT

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# Fantastic

VOL. 4  
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VOLUME 4.  
NUMBER 5



# HOLY CITY



JOE C.  
SEWELL

Warren led his column forward in a furious charge



# OF MARS

By **RALPH  
MILNE FARLEY**

**T**HE blazing sun had set, and a chill green twilight gradually deepened over the red planet.

Then the garish floodlights of the canal city Andeldug flashed on, blotting out the black sky and the tiny twin moons of Mars.

Three long Martian years ago, three thousand earthmen of the Legion of Death had ridden their sliths like mad, with sabers held high and hell in their eyes, into Daloss, the City of Lost Souls, contrary to the orders of their Red Martian

Colonel Ak-Ak, in a foolhardy attempt to rescue ten captured comrades from a fiery death on the golden altar of the black god Erlik.

All but one of those three thousand and ten had perished in this glorious adventure. And that one—Don Warren—had paid for his impetuosity with three years of penal servitude. The death penalty had been averted solely by Colonel Ak-Ak's fear of being censured for his failure to intercept the expedition; for sentences of death had to be reviewed by the Martian General Staff.

And now Don Warren was planning to return to the dread city of disaster; all because the well-remembered vision of a blue-eyed face, framed in an aureole of golden curls, lured him back—a girl named Esta, daughter of Mu-Lai, the bandit Mauro chieftain.

**Only terror lay in the Holy City of Daloss, but Don Warren went back to find Esta, the daughter of the chieftain—and to avenge the death of his entire regiment**

Exhausted—well nigh discouraged—the broad-shouldered young American soldier-of-fortune dragged his tired feet into one more Martian saloon. Would he find here a purchaser for his return-trip space-ship ticket to Earth, to which the termination of his enlistment in the Interplanetary Legion had entitled him? And, if not, would the

scanty balance of his army pay last him until he found a purchaser? For only by selling that ticket at a fair price could he obtain enough rectangular Martian

coins to equip him with a slith, a saddle and bridle for the beast, weapons, and enough compressed rations to carry him across the blazing red desert to his mecca, Daloss, City of Lost Souls, from which only one Earthman had ever returned.\*

**A** YELLOW haze of orra-root fumes softened the garish light of the helium-tubes. A quartet of black Martians from the desert hills pounded out a wailing native tune on hollow-keyed zylophones. Gaunt Jovian giants, red

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\* See "City of Lost Souls," July, 1941, issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES for the first of the stories of Martian Foreign Legion. In it, Don Warren and three thousand of his fellow legionnaires undertook a campaign to rescue several of their comrades who had been captured by the feared Mauros and taken to the legendary city of Daloss, never seen by white men. Only Warren returned alive from this disastrous venture.—Ed.



Martian aristocrats, black Martian peasants, dainty antennaed Cupians and furry Vairkings from Venus, and pale Earthmen, rubbed elbows together in a cosmopolitan throng.

Picking his way through the jostling crowd, Don Warren found a vacant booth, and ordered a goblet of poolkay from an obsequious black waiter. Poolkay, distilled—Mexican style—from the red cacti of the deserts of Mars.

As Warren paid for the searing liquor with one of the last of his oblong bits of small change, his fingers gripped upon a coin with which he would never part—the thin gold strip which he had snatched from one of the coffers in the subterranean treasure-chamber of Dallow, as Esta had guided him and Captain Hammersmith—good old Hammy, now long dead of desert fever and madness—in their escape from the dungeons of Mu-Lai, the bandit king, Esta's father.

What a picture the feel of that coin now recalled to Warren's longing mind! The picture of Esta waving goodbye, as he and Hammersmith had galloped off on the two sliths which she had provided for their escape from her father. Curls of burnished gold. Skin, shell-pink. Eyes of sapphire blue. And a slim but voluptuous figure, half-concealed, half-revealed, by her flowing white shawl, and diaphanous garments beneath.

Would he ever see her flaming loveliness again?

Had she remained true to him through the three long Martian years of his imprisonment? Or had her fierce father forced her into an unloving union with her betrothed, the handsome swart Ab-Nadik?

Warren raised the fiery draught to his lips, but his mind was not on drinking nor on his surroundings; his mind's eye was on that glorious golden vision; his

pulses raced and his senses tingled to the memory of the feel of her warm young body pressed softly against him. His Esta! His for all eternity, regardless what might befall.

A name—spoken in a well-remembered guttural voice in the next booth just beyond the dividing matting—snapped Don Warren out of his dream. The voice was that of his gross old Red Martian Colonel, Ak-Ak. And the name was that of Ben-Stu, Esta's brother!

"Sh!" another voice, a youthful voice, replied. "We may be overheard. And please don't keep repeating my name."

Heart beating rapidly, Don Warren pressed his ear against the reed-woven partition.

A testy guttural whisper, "Okeh, Ben-Stu, have it your own way. But how can we plot, if we do not talk? Now tell me how you plan to admit our troops into your father's stronghold?"

Ben-Stu's response was given in such a low tone that, strain his ears as he might, Warren could make out only a word or two. And even Colonel Ak-Ak now observed more caution.

All that Warren was able to gather from the conversation was that Ben-Stu was offering, for a price, to assist Ak-Ak's government troops to penetrate the hitherto unconquered golden City of Lost Souls.

Of course, all this might be a trap for the unwary Martian Colonel. Warren could not conceive of Esta's brother being a traitor to his father and his home.

UNABLE to make out any more of the conversation, which by now had dropped to an even lower tone, Warren settled back in his seat. But he had lost all desire for the fiery liquor which



stood on the table in front of him. So he took out his pouch of ground orra-root, rolled a cigaret, inserted it in his long metallic cigaret-holder, lighted the tip, and puffed away ruminatively.

Where ought his loyalty lie? With the government of Mars, which he had sworn to support, uphold, and defend? Or with the brother of his beloved?

While he was mulling this problem over in his mind, the idea suddenly came: how did he know that the youth in the next booth really was the Ben-Stu that he claimed to be? And then another idea followed the first: this youth couldn't possibly be Ben-Stu, for Ben-Stu was dead!

True, Don Warren had never seen Esta's brother lying dead. Nor had he ever seen the boy alive, for that matter. But he remembered now what he had heard and seen upon regaining consciousness on the cobblestones of the main thorofare of Daloss in the first mad assault of the Legion of Death on that City of Lost Souls.

Esta's mother, a hawk-faced crone, had been slitting the throats of the wounded Legionnaires, but Esta had recoiled with horror and had refused to join in that pleasant little pastime.

Then had come the mother's wail: "Great Erlik! It is my son, your brother Ben-Stu, who lies here! The cursed Earthmen have slain him!"

She had gathered the body in her arms, and the beautiful Esta, with a sudden access of fury, had cried: "Give me the knife, mother. I can kill them *now!*"

Esta had strode directly toward the spot where Warren lay, still stunned by his fall from his slith. A long kris was in her slender little hand. Her golden curls were stirring in the wind.

But when her blue eyes met those of her intended victim, it had been love at first sight for both of them, a love

which—at least so far as the Earthman was concerned—would last through all eternity.

Yes, Ben-Stu was dead. And so the young man in the next booth must be an impostor. But impostor or trickster, what mattered it? Either role boded ill for the government of Mars, if Colonel Ak-Ak were to place his trust in his young companion. For the possibility of Ben-Stu betraying his own city to the enemy never entered Warren's head.

Ought Warren warn the Colonel? Colonel Ak-Ak had been responsible for the failure of the Legion's attack on Daloss three years ago. Let him now pay the penalty by leading a fiasco himself.

THE two men in the next booth arose, and began worming their way through the milling crowd toward the exit of the saloon. Don Warren, leaving his glass of poolkay untouched, followed them.

Yes, he had been right as to the identity of the guttural voice which he had overheard. There could be no mistaking the gross waddling body, the bullet head and bull neck, of the swarthy Colonel Ak-Ak. Furthermore, he wore the uniform of an officer of the Martian army. His companion was slim and boyish, yet with broad shoulders and sturdy stride. Curly hair of the same burnished gold as Esta's. He was clad in civilian breeches and tunic of steel gray, rather than in the flowing white or striped cape of a tribesman, as Warren had expected. Warren did not get a view of the young Mauro's face.

Just outside the saloon, in the garish glare of the street floodlights, Colonel Ak-Ak and the supposed Ben-Stu halted. Warren ducked behind one of the pillars of the doorway. The two conspirators shook hands and parted,



the Colonel going to the left and the other to the right.

Warren once more hesitated for a moment, debating whether he should warn his ex-superior. Then he shrugged his broad shoulders, and followed the young Ben-Stu. It was now the supper-hour; the brightly lighted street of the space-port city was practically deserted. The long metallic cigarette-holder, still in Warren's hand, gave him an idea. He stepped rapidly forward and jabbed it suddenly into the ribs of his quarry.

"Not a move or a word, or I'll blast you!" he hissed.

The other winced, but made no attempt at a get-away.

Warren continued peremptorily, "Step into this next saloon, and no funny-business. I want a word with you." He withdrew his supposed atomic pistol, and held it so that it bulged out the folds of his tunic. The other glanced around, saw the bulge, and shrugged again. They entered the next saloon.

Warren found an empty booth, and with his left hand motioned the young Mauro inside. They sat down facing each other, Warren's gun-hand beneath the table. For a few moments the two appraised each other in silence.

Warren liked what he saw. The Mauro's face was handsome, almost beautiful, and yet not in the least effeminate. His eyes were crinkly and a deep azure blue, almost the color of Esta's. His nose was short and straight, with just the least tilt to one side. His mouth was quizzical, and yet with a certain aloofness. His chin was firm.

"Have a drink?" Warren invited.

"Thank you, no. I don't drink—with strangers."

"We can't sit here unless we order. Better join me. Here, waiter, two seltzers."

"Well?" the Mauro inquired, raising one furry dark eyebrow. "Of whom do I have the honor to be a captive?"

"I belong to the Martian secret service," Warren lied.

"So?" The Mauro did not seem in the least disturbed. If anything, he seemed relieved, slightly.

"My name is Don Warren. Ever hear it?" Esta certainly had mentioned Warren in her household. The people of Daloss must have heard the name of the only outsider ever to evade their clutches, especially inasmuch as their own Princess had aided in his escape.

**B**UT there was not the flicker of recognition in the cool blue eyes of the man opposite. He shook his head. "No—. And my name is my own business," he added.

"I stole your white slith three years ago," Warren continued, watching like a cat.

The other shrugged. "So you know who I am? Or, rather, who you *think* I am."

"I heard Colonel Ak-Ak address you as Ben-Stu."

The other grinned broadly, but said nothing.

The waiter arrived with the sodas. Warren paid him, and he withdrew. "Ben-Stu," said Warren. "I wish word of your sister, Esta."

The Mauro raised his heavy eyebrows, pursed his lips, and chuckled irritatingly. "Assuming that I *am* Ben-Stu," he said, "I answer that she is well."

"And Ab-Nadik?" This was the young Mauro officer to whom Esta had been betrothed before Warren had come into her life.

"You seem to know all the family."

"Family?" Warren sat suddenly erect, his face an agony of apprehen-



sion. "They, they are—"

"Married? Alas, no. For Esta kept postponing the ceremony. But recently the brave Lieutenant was wounded—seriously wounded in a raid. That doesn't displease you, does it? I thought not." Ben-Stu was now doing the cat-watching. "Esta has been nursing him back to health. The ceremony will take place as soon as he recovers."

"And how soon will that be?"

"About two passings of the slower moon."

Don Warren settled back with a sigh of relief. "There is yet time," he breathed.

A hand beneath the table suddenly gripped the wrist of Warren's weapon hand. The next instant he was jerked forward against the flimsy table. The Earthman, caught off guard by the sudden assault, fought first for balance, at the same time striving to jerk his right hand free from Ben-Stu's grip.

In that he erred, for immediately the Mauro's brawny left fist drove across the short expanse of table, and caught Warren flush on the point of the chin. A sick weak trembling ran through Warren from the shock, and his ears began to ring. Instinctively he clung to Ben-Stu's wrist under the table, locking the Mauro's right arm, and at the same time trying to shake the cobwebs from his reeling brain.

Ben-Stu, snarling fiercely, tried to get his right arm loose. Failing, he yanked Warren toward him. The Earthman's weight was thrown heavily against the table, upsetting it. The table tipped out of the booth. Ben-Stu rolled free. But Warren, clawing wildly for support, grasped nothing but air and came down with his belly smack against the upturned table edge.

He felt consciousness recede, but managed to slide off onto the floor, and

then stagger to his feet. He opened his eyes to see at least three weaving bobbing Ben-Stu's attack him, and his arms went up in defense.

Ben-Stu's fist, crashing against Warren's head, rocked him out of his daze. His strength returned. Gritting his teeth, he closed in and exchanged hard punishing body-blows with the young Mauro.

By this time a crowd had gathered and were wildly cheering the two combatants. Warren paid no attention to them. He sent a blow to Ben-Stu's mouth that brought blood trickling over the firm young chin. The angered Mauro waded in fiercely, caught the giddy Warren under the heart and made him sag. Then a smashing fist into the jaw, and Warren slid to the floor.

FLAT on his back lay Don Warren, in the midst of a circle of thrilled spectators. His wiry opponent knelt astride of him, one hand on Warren's throat, the other gripping the supposed barrel of the supposed ray-gun. With a wrench, he snatched it away, and held it up in triumph. Then he grimaced at the anticlimax of finding that it was not the weapon he had supposed.

But he quickly covered-up his chagrin by shouting, "So you would try to steal my cigarette-holder? Let this teach you a lesson."

He gave the prostrate Earthman a slap on the face, and rose to his feet. Furious, humiliated, Warren too got up. Both men brushed themselves off, and smoothed their rumpled tunics. Disappointed, the audience dispersed.

Ben-Stu clapped his hands peremptorily. "Waiter, put back the table, and bring two poolkays." Then to Warren, "As I said before, I do not drink with *strangers*."

The two young men reseated them-



selves in their boot.

Ben-Stu, pocketing the cigarette-holder, said, "I shall keep this as a memento of a very pleasant evening."

The drinks arrived. The Mauro paid the waiter. Then he leaned forward across the table, toying with the stem of his goblet with one slim virile hand, and inquired. "And what proof have you that you are the man who stole my slith?"

"This," Warren replied, a little angrily. He groped in his pocket, and produced the ancient gold coin, filched from the treasure-room of Daloss.

His companion studied it intently, turning it over and over. Then shook his head. "No go," he said, as he handed it back. "I never saw one like it. And now that you do not know whether or not I am the son of Mu-Lai, the bandit, and I do not know whether or not *you* are Don Warren, what next?"

"Why are you in Andeldug?" Warren snapped, with a suddenness well calculated to catch the other off his guard.

The Mauro shrugged his lithe shoulders. "A fair question. I *might* be about to take a brief trip to the Earth. After all, Andeldug *is* a space-sport, you know. What else would a fellow be doing here?"

"Have you yet bought your ticket?"

"No. Why?"

"Would you be interested in getting one at half price?"

"Possibly."

"Sold!" Warren exclaimed, pulling out his ticket and handing it over.

Ben-Stu withdrew a fat wallet from the folds of his tunic, and counted out several rectangular gold-pieces. "You ought to have robbed me, instead of questioning me. It would have been much more productive. Well, give my regards to my *sister*." He put a

peculiar emphasis on the last word.

Thrusting the wallet and the ticket into a pocket of his tunic, he arose and held out his slender sinewy hand. "Till we meet again." Grinning quizzically, he left the booth.

Don Warren stared after him, until he was lost in the crowd. Then gulping down both poolkays, the Earthman departed for a decent night's lodging.

THE next morning Warren purchased a fine grey slith, a saddle and bridle, saddle bags, two atomic pistols, and all the ammunition and compressed food the beast could carry. Then he ferried down the Great Canal to Ricca, from which point he set out on slithback across the burning sands toward the distant Fobian Range—and what lay beyond.

But just as he was riding out of the city gates of Ricca onto the broad red plain, a tall figure shrouded in a white desert-cape stepped before him, and held up one hand. Warren reined-in his slith.

"What are *you* doing here, Ben-Stu?" he exclaimed. "I thought you were bound for Earth."

"That can wait," the young Mauro replied, striding up alongside the slith. Then he glanced furtively around, and whispered, "How would you like safe-conduct to the city of my father?"

Warren's pulse leaped at the prospect. But, inherently cautious, he countered with, "At what price?"

"Your caution does you credit. The price is to work with Colonel Ak-Ak and me."

"At what?"

"Oh, I thought you had overheard us when you were skulking in the next booth to us, last night. We plan to overthrow my father, and make me King of Daloss."

Warren drew in his breath sharply.



He had never expected this! Blinded by the resemblance of this young Martian to his reputed sister, Warren had instinctively assumed that whatever Mauro treachery might lurk in Ben-Stu's make-up would be directed against the enemies of his city, not against his own kin. And yet why not? Esta had been willing to betray her father for love of Don Warren; so why should not Ben-Stu betray his father for love of his own self?

Warren hastily suppressed a growing look of horror and contempt, and smiled enigmatically. Ben-Stu watched him craftily, intently.

"Surprised, eh?" asked the Mauro.

"N-no." Warren pursed his lips ruminatively. "Merely wondering."

"Wondering what?"

"What the Martian government expects to get out of the deal?"

"If you were the secret-service agent you pretended to be last evening, you'd know."

"Completely exposed, aren't I?" Warren dissembled a light laugh. "Well, I might as well come clean with you, as I expect you to come clean with me. I was sentenced to three years in the penal battalion and then drummed out of the Interplanetary Legion for that little escapade of attacking your impregnable city three years ago. The government of Mars was responsible both for the failure of our expedition and for my being punished for that failure. So why should I help them to make a success of a second attack?"

**WARREN** had been very careful not to express any hostility to Colonel Ak-Ak, though it had been Ak-Ak, rather than the government of Mars, who had been responsible for both the failure of the expedition and Warren's penal servitude. Warren was banking on Ben-Stu not knowing the

background of the previous adventure.

Ben-Stu now replied, "Right enough. Why should you, any more than I, assist that government?" His blue eyes glinted like blue steel. "Know then that Ak-Ak is a traitor to that government which you hate. He and I plan to rule Daloss together. Then to Erlik with the red rulers of Mars!"

This was worse and more of it! Tempted though Warren was to dissemble further, and thus obtain the coveted pass which would ensure him safe entry to the city which held his beloved, his contempt at her treacherous brother and his realization of what the rule of the gross Colonel Ak-Ak might mean to her people, overcame all sense of discretion.

With a shout of "For Mu-Lai and Esta," he wheeled his slith toward the young man who stood unsuspectingly beside him, and drove his spurs into the beast's grey reptilian sides to ride Ben-Stu down.

Although taken with surprise, Ben-Stu with native quickness leaped aside. The slith's shoulder struck him a glancing blow, but the wiry Mauro wheeled and flung himself at Warren.

His clawing fingers clutched Warren's waist and fastened tightly in his garments. Warren was yanked from his mount by the forward motion of the charging slith, and flopped heavily to the ground, with the cursing clawing Ben-Stu atop him.

But this time Warren didn't have the breath knocked from him, nor was he off balance as he had been in the cafe. He sprang to his feet, as Ben-Stu, head down and fists flailing, came tearing in. In the heat of battle both men forgot their atomic pistols. This was a grudge fight—man against man.

Warren planted his feet in the deep red sand and shot out a speeding right fist. It caught Ben-Stu flush in the



neck—brought him straight upright. Again Warren's fist streaked for the other's jaw, and Ben-Stu tripped back into the sand.

The Earthman leaped forward in an attempt to fling himself upon his rival, but Ben-Stu craftily dove for Warren's feet, clamped them in his grip and jerked Warren to the ground. Like a wild beast he crawled upward to get at Warren's throat. The Earthman nimbly twisted aside and to his knees.

Once more they were on their feet. Again they charged at each other, Ben-Stu reckless, and Warren cagily making sure of his footing before he struck. As Ben-Stu came charging in for the third time, Warren let him have a right across to the chin. This time Ben-Stu crumpled to the sands, and before he could get up Warren was atop him.

Ben-Stu kicked furiously and tried to twist aside, but the triumphant Earthman was not to be denied. His hands found his victim's pulsing throat, his own neck craned and averted just out of reach of the frantically flailing fists of Ben-Stu.

The Mauro's untamed blue eyes stared upward with a searching appeal. His lips moved as if to voice some plea, but Warren's strong fingers clamped tighter, and no sound came. Ben-Stu's complexion turned a mottled purple. His eyeballs protruded.

Warren snarled, "This will put an end to your treason! Esta's brother a traitor! Bah!"

**B**UT after all Esta loved her brother—traitor or no traitor. There could be no doubt of that. Warren's thoughts flashed back to the time when, as he lay on the cobblestones of the City of Lost Souls stunned by a fall from his slith, the report of the death of this brother had galvanized the golden-haired Esta into a fit of beserk

rage against all the wounded Legionnaires.

With a sigh and a grimace of disgust, Don Warren relaxed his strangling grip on Ben-Stu's throat, and rose wearily.

Ben-Stu's own hands now clutched at his own throat. His chest strained mightily, until at last a tortured raucous gasp came through his swollen lips. His popping eyeballs receded. The mottled purple fled from his cheeks. He sat up, shook himself, and grinned.

He cleared his throat a few times. "Well," he coughed, "that makes us quits for the licking I gave you in the tavern last night. Do you wish the cigaret-holder back, or may I still keep it as a souvenir?"

"Cut the comedy!" Warren rasped, still standing menacingly over him, with both fists clenched. "I ought to have killed you for the traitor that you are."

"So? And give up getting the free pass into Daloss, which I offered you?"

"I'm not thinking of myself. I'm thinking of Esta. And," a bit ruefully, "it was only because you are—or claim to be—her brother, that I finally spared your life."

"Thanks to little sister for that much." Ben-Stu blew an airy kiss to the vast expanse of red desert which lay around them. Then sobering, "Now listen, you impetuous fool! If you hadn't had such an infernally tight grip on my windpipe, I'd have been able to save my own life by a simple explanation. I have no intent whatever of betraying my people or my father. Colonel Ak-Ak is a scoundrel. Anyone who follows him in this venture is a traitor to Mars, and deserves no sympathy. I have entered into this pretended conspiracy with Ak-Ak for one purpose only—to find out whom of my own people can be trusted."



"And, on the side, to entrap and destroy a large government force?"

"You show remarkable discernment for one so dumb."

Warren grimaced. Ben-Stu grinned, and struggled to his feet. The two young men faced each other, sizing each other up.

Then Warren held out his hand. "I'm with you," he declared.

"Good!" Ben-Stu gripped the extended hand. Then he took a card and a stylus from some pocket beneath his flowing white cape, and scribbled a note on it. "This will get you through Ak-Ak's lines, to Daloss. Give my regards to my sister."

Warren had no difficulty in rounding up his slith, which was browsing peacefully on a clump of red desert moss about a hundred yards away.

Then, waving to Ben-Stu, he galloped off toward the dim green slopes of the Fobian Mountains on the distant horizon. Other days long distant he had ridden the same terrain, accompanied by hellbent Legionnaires, lured by the treasure of Daloss. This time he rode alone. Would there be a return?

THE more that Warren thought about the situation, the less certain he felt. With so much intrigue afoot, just who was double-crossing whom?

Was Ben-Stu really Esta's supposedly dead brother? Was Ben-Stu deceiving Colonel Ak-Ak; or was he, after all, a traitor to his own father? What was the real nature of the conspiracy between these two plotters? And had the young Mauro told the truth about Esta and Ab-Nadik?

Along toward afternoon, Warren noticed a black line of men on sliths approaching in the distance, far to the left. For a moment he watched them. Were they friends or foes? Better not to

take a chance on meeting them now.

Warren jabbed his spurs into the slith, and the lean reptile leaped forward. But the Earthman had gone only a short distance when he observed that the cavalcade had apparently spotted him. The black line veered sharply toward him, splitting into two parts.

"Now I am in for trouble," growled Warren to himself. "But perhaps I can circle that large dune ahead, and elude them."

He made good speed to the dune, and spurred up its side, with one of the two detachments of slithmen in close pursuit.

As he gained its crest, he looked ahead to find that the other detachment were charging up the slope on that side. He was trapped between two fires, one from ahead, the other from the rear. Furthermore he could now make out that these were government troops.

Off to one side was a cleft in the dune. Instantly Warren's plans were made.

Sitting on his mount at the extreme crest of the dune, he discharged an atomic blast at each of the enemy groups in succession. Then shouted, so that both could hear, "Come on, men, charge! We've got them cornered. I ride to join you."

Of course, he did not ride to join either detachment of the enemy. Instead he wheeled his mount, and slunk off down the declivity to one side, while the two detachments of the enemy met with a hail of fire, at the top of the ridge, each group imagining the other to be henchmen of Warren.

The defile into which Warren had dropped, was a twisted one, and so he was concealed from the battling forces. But he made the mistake of spurring out onto the plain and trying to escape. Instantly the government cavalymen spotted him. One cried "There goes our man!"



Warren whirled in his saddle. His atomic pistols spat death at his pursuers.

Their returning fire blasted his slith. The animal went down, flinging Warren headlong. He had just time to crawl behind a large red sandstone boulder when his pursuers reached the spot. Atomic blasts flamed against the rock, splintering it and tearing big holes in the sand nearby.

The Earthman blazed away at his enemies until his guns would perform no more. His last charge of atomic force gone, Warren flung down his useless weapons, and held his arms aloft as a token of surrender.

"Well, now that you bandits have captured me," he shouted, "what do you propose to do with me?"

**T**HERE was a moment of silence. Then a sergeant motioned to two privates to bind the captive. Warily they approached, for Don Warren had taken a heavy toll of their comrades, and so they still held him in great respect, although now apparently unarmed.

"What do you mean 'bandits'?" the sergeant exclaimed. "We are government troops."

"No?" Warren ejaculated, raising his eyebrows in well-feigned surprise. "Thank God! I thought you were Mauros. Why didn't you say who you were, in the first place? It would have saved me a nasty scare, and would have spared you the loss of half your detachment. Well, no one can blame me for resisting capture by what I thought to be tribesmen."

"How can you prove you didn't know our identity?" the sergeant truculently replied. Yet there was an undercurrent of uncertainty in his tones.

Warren chuckled to himself. "My papers are in perfect shape, and I am

not wanted by the authorities. I have a license to prospect in the desert. And surely no tribunal would believe that I was so foolhardy as to attack a whole platoon of regulars." He shrugged his broad shoulders, as though perfectly at ease.

The sergeant too shrugged. "Well, come along and tell your story to Colonel Ak-Ak."

Warren with difficulty suppressed the gleam of joy which flared into his eyes. He had not dared hope that these forces against whom he had been fighting were those allied with Ben-Stu. Rather had he feared that they were some other detachment of government troops who would enforce the law against trading with the City of Lost Souls. Wouldn't Ak-Ak be surprised to see him, Ak-Ak's old enemy and especially under safe conduct from Ak-Ak's co-conspirator, Ben-Stu!

More cavalrymen than sliths had been slain in the battle, and so there was a vacant mount available for the captive. The smooth gait of the animal made riding not unpleasant, even with bound hands.

Early in the cool green desert evening, the detachment galloped into a tented encampment, clustering around a small red-stone house. Here Warren was immediately ushered into the presence of Colonel Ak-Ak.

Not a flicker of recognition did the gross red Martian aristocrat give to the prisoner.

The sergeant gave a surprisingly truthful account of the battle, of course omitting the part where each section of his own command had mistaken the other section for the enemy. He claimed that, on Warren's first approach, he had identified himself and his men as government troops; but magnanimously admitted that Warren may have misunderstood or may not have heard.



In return for this sporting treatment, Warren confirmed the sergeant's story, adding merely that he had mistaken the troops for Mauro bandits, and had promptly surrendered as soon as he realized the identity of the attackers.

WHEN Warren concluded his narration, Colonel Ak-Ak with a wave of his pudgy copper-hued hand, ordered the sergeant and the guards to withdraw.

"But, Colonel," the sergeant remonstrated, "the prisoner is a dangerous and desperate character."

"Do you insinuate," Ak-Ak snarled, "that I, an aristocrat of Mars, am not capable of handling this Earth-scum? Be gone!"

Sheepishly they withdrew.

When they had closed the door behind them, Ak-Ak's face broke into a narrow-eyed smile.

"Well, Sergeant Warren," he belowed, "for you once *were* a sergeant under me—or have you forgotten?—what brings you here?"

"You saw what brought me here, a squad of your own soldiers," Warren boldly replied. "But, if I had deigned to show them *this*, they would have brought me in honor, rather than as a prisoner."

He thrust his hand into one of the pockets of his tunic. Then his face fell. Hastily he searched through all his pockets, one by one, over and over.

The safe-conduct pass given him by Ben-Stu was nowhere to be found!

"A BLUFF, eh?" the Martian Colonel growled. "Well, now at last you are in my hands, and what should have been done three years ago can now be completed. I ought to have had you shot for your foolhardy part, in leading three thousand of the best troops of the Interplanetary Legion to

a useless death in the City of Lost Souls."

"If you had helped us, instead of hindered us, the assault on that city would *not* have been useless," Warren boldly replied.

"Enough of this insolence!" Ak-Ak barked, pounding on his desk with one hamlike fist. "I now have it in my power to condemn you to death, for attacking government troops. But perhaps you would care to buy your life."

"With what?"

Colonel Ak-Ak's pig eyes glittered. "With information. If you answer me truthfully, I will not only spare you—I might even offer you back your old rank of Sergeant. For you are a brave fighter, and *I* need such men."

"You—or Mars?"

Ak-Ak gripped the edges of his desk, and the pig eyes in his swarthy face became slits. "What do you mean?"

"Merely that I am an ally and a friend of your friend and ally, Ben-Stu of Daloss."

"Ben-Stu and I are allies yes," the Martian Colonel muttered, half to himself, "but friends, no. Allies of convenience and necessity; but I mistrust Ben-Stu—and his friends. No need to question you any further. You know too much. You will, my dear Sergeant—*ex*-Sergeant rather—have to stand trial for your treasonable assault on my outpost."

"Isn't that rather foolish of you, Colonel? What if I were to testify that I know of *your* treasonable plan to use government troops to place yourself on the throne of Daloss? Colonel Ak-Ak, it is now *my* turn to dicker. The price of my silence is my freedom. Let me have a slith, provide me with a new supply of desert rations, and I give you my word of honor that I will open the gates of Daloss for you."

Colonel Ak-Ak grinned ingratiating-



ly. "Young man, you win. I was just testing you. You are free to leave. I'll write you a pass." He pulled open the top right-hand drawer of the desk, and took out a pad of blank-forms, emblazoned with the coat-of-arms of Mars.

**B**UT there was an evil glint in his little pig eyes, which he could not conceal. And following the line of sight of Ak-Ak's glance, Warren saw that it rested on the butt-end of an atomic pistol, lying in the open drawer from which the Colonel had taken the pad of forms.

"So?" said Warren to himself. "Very clever of the old buzzard! The 'ley fugo,' a quaint Old Spanish custom. I'm to be permitted to leave, and then will be shot in the back as I do so. Ak-Ak will retrieve the pass which he gives me, and the coroner's verdict will be: 'Shot while attempting to escape.' Very neat!"

Aloud he said, "It is very gracious of you, Colonel. One who trusts me, is never sorry. But would you mind telling me what you are writing on the pass—for, alas, I cannot read Martian."

Ak-Ak made a gesture of pretended annoyance, but a crafty smile spread over his gross jowls. "There, you've made me spoil it, with your chatter." He ripped off the top sheet of the pad, and tore it up. Then, as he resumed writing, he read aloud: "Furnish Donald Warren with a slith, arms, and desert rations, and pass him through my lines. Ak-Ak, Colonel, Imperial Martian Army."

He ripped off the sheet and handed it to Warren. And once more his glance rested on the butt of the atomic pistol in the open upper right-hand drawer of his desk.

Warren took the pass, folded it without reading it, and stuffed it into one of the pockets of his tunic. Clicking his

heels together, he saluted smartly. Colonel Ak-Ak lumbered to his feet, and returned the salute, stepping around the corner of the desk and letting his left hand rest casually on the edge of the open drawer.

Warren held out his hand. "Good-bye, sir, and thank you."

Smiling craftily, Ak-Ak instinctively held out his own right hand, to accept the proffered handshake.

Slowly, without a flicker of the eye to indicate his intent, Warren clasped the extended hand. Then suddenly he yanked the Colonel toward him, off balance and away from that open drawer. Warren's left fist shot out straight to Ak-Ak's jaw, and the gross Martian Colonel crumpled and sagged to the floor without a sound.

Warren bent down. Working at high speed, he ripped the Colonel's tunic into shreds, and gagged his mouth and bound his wrists and ankles with the pieces.

Next to read the alleged pass. Inexpert as Warren was with the written pictographs of Mars, he was able to make out that the paper directed his arrest on sight. But the torn paper lying on the floor, the one which Ak-Ak had prepared before Warren had stated his inability to read Martian—that one was in truth phrased correctly.

Hurriedly Warren transcribed its hieroglyphs onto a fresh sheet, and forged the Colonel's signature at the bottom. Then pocketing the Colonel's weapon, he stepped out of the little stone house, closing the door behind him.

**T**O THE burly guard outside he reported, "The Colonel asks not to be disturbed for an hour by—anyone. He has some important paperwork to do."

Before the stupid guard had time to digest that information, Warren was



striding toward the picket-line. There he flashed his pass to the officer in charge, and picked out what seemed to be the fastest slith tethered there. At the commissary, rations, weapons and ammunition were forthcoming. Everywhere the forged pass worked magic.

Warren glanced back at the Headquarters building—all was quiet there, with the sentinel still pacing up and down outside. So Warren led his laden mount to the edge of the camp.

But here an unexpected difficulty presented itself. A lanky sentinel studied Warren's pass. "I can see the seal of Mars, all right, but I can't make out all these lizard-tracks."

Warren read the pass aloud, but still the sentinel shook his head. "I'll have to call the Corporal of the Guard, though I doubt if *he* knows how to read either."

Interminable delay presented itself. The Corporal would escort him to the guard-house, so the the Officer of the Guard could inspect the pass. By that time almost anything might have happened.

In fact, it was happening right now. As Warren looked back toward the camp, the door of headquarters swung open, and Colonel Ak-Ak, still gagged and trussed-up rolled out. There was no time to lose.

"But I am Sergeant Donald Warren, you numbskull!" Warren explained. "It will go hard with you, if you do not honor this pass. I am on an important mission of reconnaissance, and must leave immediately!"

"Sorry, Sir, but I never saw you before."

"Nor have I ever seen you! That makes it unanimous."

The sentry scratched his head. While he was dumbly trying to figure that one out, Warren vaulted into the saddle, and was off across the red desert at a full

gallop. The befuddled sentry shrugged his shoulders, and let him go.

However, by this time Colonel Ak-Ak was on his feet, unbound and ungagged, shouting orders. Soon a mounted detail was in hot pursuit of the fugitive. Now indeed the "ley fugo" could be put into effect; and, if successful, there need be no *pretense* that Warren was "attempting to escape."

But first they would have to catch him. Warren had chosen well, in selecting his slith from the picket line, for this noble saurian was indeed fleet-footed and in the prime of condition.

ONE factor more was in Warren's favor. The greenish shadows of the Martian night were deepening. If the speed of his slith held up, he might escape his pursuers in the gathering dusk. So he bent forward on his mount, crooning words of sweet encouragement, mixed with searing oaths, into its ears in an effort to coax even more speed out of the animal.

But his pursuers had evidently trailed fugitives countless times before. Their strategy was to send their fleetest mounted sliths ahead, and to follow with other fresh unmounted sliths strung out behind led by other riders. In this manner, when sliths bearing riders tired from the weight they carried, fresh sliths could be substituted with very little delay.

Warren, blasting away at his pursuers, was astonished at the way in which the distance between him and his enemies was being slowly cut down, in spite of the speed of his own slith. He could not understand how at one moment he seemed to be leaving them behind only to have the gap narrow quickly the next.

The rolling red desert did not have enough rock formations to enable Warren to circle or sidetrack his pursuers. He saw that he would have to wait for



that until he reached the Fobian Mountains now almost directly ahead of him.

The slith's speed was slowing down by the time the Earthman reached the mountain slopes. Night was now falling fast beneath the twin moons of Mars. Warren guided his roaring mount into a deep narrow canyon, momentarily eluding the posse.

From this point he was able to climb higher into the mountains, and his heart began to sing as he thought he was giving his pursuers the slip.

His joy was shortlived, however. Gazing down into the valley, he noticed tiny twinklings of flashlights as the posse followed the splay footprints of his slith. Well, anyway, that procedure would slow them up. They'd never catch him now.

But wait! Where was he? Warren had been going up and up, and now found himself on a narrow rock ledge with a precipice on one side and a towering cliff on the other. A natural mountain trap that he had unwittingly gotten into.

He could of course go back. But that would be folly! He was outnumbered at least twenty to one. He turned his slith about. The animal bumped against something, and its fore part went down heavily. Warren jumped just in time to avoid being crushed by the animal.

He felt its leg. Broken!

For a moment he stood undecided. Already he could hear the shouts of his pursuers not far distant. He drew his atomic pistol, fired, and the steed lay limp.

"Too bad, old fellow," said Warren sadly. "You served me well."

**Q**UICKLY he stuffed compressed rations into his mouth, shoved the pistols into his pocket with as many refills as he could carry. Then he pushed the carcass of the dead slith to

the precipice and sent it toppling over.

The voices of his pursuers were closer now. Wearily, Warren began climbing the steep cliff to his right. It was his only chance! There was no retreat.

The cliff was terrifically steep. Warren's hands were stiff and bleeding. Several times he almost lost his footing, and experienced a sensation of dizziness as he thought of the drop into the abyss below. But he kept on, sheer will power driving his muscles to greater exertion. Finally, he pulled himself over the top and lay in a depression, panting, resting his aching body.

He heard voices below, but did not dare to look. Well, if they climbed up after him, he would shoot it out with them to the end.

"See! Here is blood," said someone. Boots scraped on hard rock.

"The slith fell, cut its leg, and they both rolled over the edge," said another. "Well, our chase is ended. The fellow is dead."

Warren heard them leave, but he was too tired to peer over the rock. Bat-like reptiles flew about him, brushing him with their wings. He did not even move to shoo them away, and shortly fell into a deep sleep.

In the chill morning he awoke cold and hungry. The eminence on which he lay sloped gently down away from the top of the cliff which he had scaled. Warren rubbed his eyes and peered into the distance on all sides. Westward he could barely discern the outlines of Colonel Ak-Ak's camp. So he set out north-east, in the general direction of Daloss—and Esta.

He found a few pieces of compressed rations in his pockets. But these morsels made his hunger worse. His throat was dry as paper. If only he reached his destination before hunger and thirst finished him.

For hours he wandered down the



mountain slopes out into red desert, footsore and discouraged. Every step became an effort. His throat burned constantly.

By evening he was plodding along ready to drop at every step from exhaustion. He had found nothing to eat or drink. His bloodshot eyes stared like those of a man whose mind had fled. Just when he sank to the ground and fell asleep, he never remembered.

**W**HEN morning came, he was unable to rise. He was weak and shaken and his throat felt as if iron bands were closing it. Somehow he finally got up and stumbled forward on his cut and bloody feet. Would his quest end here? Would he die before he reached the City of Lost Souls?

The red sands were blistering his sore feet, reddening his eyes, and stiffening his eyelashes.

His bleary gaze fastened on the space before him. In the distance he could see men on sliths approaching from several directions. They seemed to be Mauros—clad in white robes. Should he shoot it out with them?

His hands felt for the atomic pistols. They were gone, apparently lost in his wanderings. Fool! Why had he not strapped them to him?

He glanced about, found a craterlike declivity in the red sands and lay down. Perhaps they wouldn't find him there. If they did, they would probably shoot him on sight. If they didn't find him, he would probably die anyway.

**T**HE Mauros trotted closer and met about a hundred meters distant from Warren's hiding place. They exchanged greetings and dismounted. In the clear desert air Warren could hear every word. He learned that they were patrols, scouting against the reported

advance of government troops, of which, however, they had seen none.

It had been hot and stuffy enough in this hole when Warren had crawled into it, exhausted, famished, and perishing of thirst. But, as the glaring sun mounted in the cloudless desert sky, the heat became unbearable. Sweat oozed from every pore of a body already dehydrated to the limit. And yet this sweat brought no cooling relief, so swiftly was its moisture sucked up by the furnace-hot dry desert atmosphere.

Warren lay prone on the burning sands, face-down to shield his eyes from the blazing glare of the noonday sun. But at last he could no longer stand the heat of the sun's rays upon his back, and rolled over, face upwards, covering his eyes with his blistered hands.

"Dear God, don't let me die like this!" he prayed. "Erlik, black deity of my Esta, I'll even put in a word to thee. Let me see my beloved once more, and I'll burn incense even on thy golden altar."

He laughed harshly, as his reeling mind recalled the story of the old Irish lady who used to bend the knee, not only whenever the priest mentioned the name of one of the blessed Trinity, but even when he mentioned the devil. The priest, noticing this, remonstrated with her; but she replied, "Now, feyther a little politeness never hurt no-one; and who can tell what may happen?"

The voices of the Mauro scouts droned on interminably.

Shading his eyes Warren stared up into the limitless expanse of black sky, and discerned a faint sun-tinged speck of silver-gray, circling about. The speck descended in ever widening circles, growing larger and larger, until Warren could make out the shape of a bat-desert buzzard, settling toward him.



The Mauros too noticed it.

"Here comes the angel of death," one declared. "May Erlik, the black god, preserve us!"

"Wonder what the foul beast sees," spoke another. "Doubtless something in that hollow over there."

"Oh, some carcass, likely," shrugged a third. "So long as *we* still live, why worry!"

WITH a croak, the huge pterodactyl settled onto the red sands a few meters away from the prostrate Earthman, flexed and unflexed its leathery wings a few times, then folded them with a clatter, and hopped over to him, craning its wrinkled neck, and cocking its ungainly head on one side, to stare at him out of beady black eyes. An overpowering reptilian stench filled the little crater.

Warren retched, and the bat-buzzard recoiled a few hops in surprise.

Warren kicked one foot at the beast in the hope of shooing it away; but this gesture only excited its curiosity. It hopped closer. The man tried to spit at it, but no saliva came into his parched mouth.

Raising himself painfully upon his left elbow, he scratched in the sand with his right hand, found a small red stone, and heaved it at the creature. The stone was a direct hit. With a squawk of surprise, the bat-lizard flapped aloft for a few wing-strokes; then settled down again and furled its leathery wings.

"Something queer going on over in that hollow!" one of the Mauros exclaimed. "Let's investigate."

A loud scornful laugh greeted his suggestion, and he subsided.

As for Warren, he collapsed weakly, totally enervated by his effort. The desert reeled and swam about him. He was almost past caring what happened.

A sharp painful blow on his chest aroused him. He opened his eyes. The leathery buzzard was perched upon him, tentatively pecking at him with its beak. The fetid stench of its nearness was overpowering; but Warren's thirst was so intense that at that instant he could have gulped down sewage with relish. This creature, gaunt though it was, must have blood in its veins: stinking blood, but blood, a liquid!

Quickly swinging up both hands across his body, Warren clutched the neck of his tormenter, and squeezed. Squeezed so quickly that no squawk, nor even a hiss, came from the beast. Its eyes bulged out. Its beak opened and closed spasmodically. It beat at him with its leather wings, and clawed at him with its knifelike talons. But still he held on, and squeezed all the tighter, with a desperation born of desert madness.

FINALLY the beast went limp, and its reptilian writhings ceased. Avidly Warren pulled its long wrinkled neck down toward his face, withdrew cracked and swollen lips from his teeth, and sought for the jugular vein of his victim.

All thought of his surroundings had fled from his heat-crazed mind. He knew but one idea—liquid to slake his parched palate.

A laugh above him snapped him back to the realities of his situation. Flinging the dead reptile from him, he staggered to his feet, and groped for the atomic pistol which he did not have.

The whole rim of the hollow was lined with Mauros, fierce dark-visaged hawk-nosed Mauros in flowing white capes.

"We have you covered," spoke one. "Better come peaceably."

Tiredly, with a great effort, Warren raised his arms above his head. Then his knees buckled, and he pitched for-



ward on his face on the hot sands.

After interminable eras he opened his eyes again. His head lay in the lap of a Mauro warrior, whose not unkindly visage was peering down at him.

"Water!" he croaked.

The mouth of a canteen was inserted between his lips, and a warm trickle entered his gullet. With a sigh, Warren passed out again.

Vague recollections of jolting along, slung face down across the withers of a slith. Then twilight, cool green evening shadows, and the tents and fires of a Mauro encampment. Once more oblivion, broken only by a dream—or was it a dream?—of hot and savory broth.

WHEN Warren next opened his eyes, it was to the calm awakening from a refreshing sleep. Sweltering noonday once more. He was lying on a bed of mats and skins in a small striped tent. Just outside the opening, squatted a burly Mauro sentinel grasping a long atomic rifle in one black hand. Warren hailed him. The guard parted the tent-flaps, and stepped inside.

"How you feel?" he asked.

Warren grinned. "Better. How does it happen that you fellows treated me so kindly? I thought that desert tribesmen always killed their captives. Tortured them, even."

The Mauro bared his white teeth in a mirthless grin as he replied, "Our chief says to be very good to prisoners, so that he can ask them questions."

"And then?"

"After that we torture them." His dark eyes gleamed expectantly, and he bared his teeth again.

"Pleasant prospect. And who is your chief?"

"Ben-Stu."

Warren gasped with relief. "Not really?" he eagerly exclaimed. But Ben-Stu had been headed for a space-

trip to the Earth. He couldn't be here! It was too good to be true!

The Mauro shrugged. "He here all right."

"Then send for him! At once! Please! He's a friend of mine. Tell him that you have captured his friend, Don Warren."

The Mauro shrugged again, ducked out between the tent flaps, and called to another tribesman who happened to be swishing by in his white cape. The two whispered together for a moment, with occasional glances toward the man inside the tent. Then the other strode away, and the burly sentinel squatted down again and resumed his watch.

After a long wait, a squad arrived, and escorted Warren to headquarters, a rather palatial marquee for such desert forces. Warren half expected to find that Ben-Stu was not there, after all; and so he was not surprised nor very disappointed, when he was led into the presence of a typical hawk-nosed gun-metal-black desert chieftain.

The man reclined in a sort of elaborate folding camp-chair.

"Name?" he snapped, surveying Warren coldly from beneath long black lashes.

"Donald Warren, Earthman, lately Sergeant of the Imperial Martian Army."

"Any proof of your identity?"

"Yes." Warren fished in the pockets of his torn blouse, found the forged pass, somewhat matted and blotted by sweat, and handed it over.

The Mauro chieftain gingerly unfolded it, deciphered the name and the signature, reading them both haltingly aloud, then grinned engagingly and motioned to another reclining chair near his. Warren slumped gratefully into it, for he was still very weak.

The Mauro turned to one of the guards. "Tell him it's he," was the



cryptic message which he gave. Then to Warren, "Well, Sergeant, you certainly were carrion buzzard-bait last night when they brought you in. We doubted if you would live for questioning. But today you are up on your feet. There is a saying on Venus: 'You cannot kill an Earthman.'"

"I've never been to Venus."

"Nor have I. But I once knew a Cupian maiden. She taught me much. And I taught her a thing or two." His sharp eyes glinted reminiscently.

THE doorway curtain was pushed aside, and Ben-Stu strode in. But what a changed Ben-Stu. The same blue eyes, curly yellow hair, and incongruously Nordic features, it was true; but the charming youth whom Warren had known was now crown prince of Daloss.

Warren staggered to his feet. "Thank God, Sir, it's you!" he exclaimed.

"God? What means this profanity in the presence of a true believer?"

"Thank Erlik, I mean," Warren stammered.

"That's better." The regal look dropped from Ben-Stu's boyish face, and he grinned his old-time friendly grin. "Well, Warren my old friend, it's certainly good to see you again. Please accept my apologies."

"Your apologies for what, Ben?"

"For not bringing you here in person. But sit down. You have been through many trials and tribulations. I can read them in your lined features and tired eyes. Changed plans bring me here unexpectedly. But honestly, when you left me and rode off into the desert on your slith, headed for Daloss, it was not my intent to rejoin my forces for some time, nor did I know where any of them could be reached at the moment, or I could have spared you much suffering. But after all, as they say in

England on your planet, 'all's well that ends well.' Here you are, safe and sound. Even your sufferings have not been in vain, for they have demonstrated to me your fortitude and dependability. A true brother, you will be. Well, what happened to you?"

The dark-faced Mauro interrupted grimly with, "Ben-Stu, Read this." And handed him the forged pass.

Ben-Stu read, with a gathering scowl on his blond features. Then wheeling around upon the confused and surprised Earthman, he barked, "So you are a traitor, after all, a henchman of that treacherous crraat, Ak-Ak!"

"Just a minute! Just a minute!" Warren remonstrated, holding up one hand. "I thought that Ak-Ak was a buddy of yours. But I hate him no less than you seem to do. Listen to the story of my adventures, and then judge for yourself where my loyalty lies."

"Very well. Proceed." But his voice was grim, and held little hope.

Nevertheless, Warren proceeded to relate, calmly and dispassionately, his adventures since they two had parted just outside the City of Ricca.

He told how he had fought with, and been captured by, government troops, not knowing them to be Ak-Ak's. How Ak-Ak had surprisingly been enraged at finding him to be a friend of Ben-Stu's, and had attempted to trick him by the ley fugo. But he had slugged Ak-Ak, and had forged this pass to get a slith and equipment and free passage through Ak-Ak's lines. Then all about the pursuit by Ak-Ak's men, Warren's desert wanderings, and finally his capture by Ben-Stu's Mauros, as he battled with the huge bat-lizard in the hole in the desert.

WHEN Warren finished, Ben-Stu coldly remarked, "A likely story!



What do *you* think, Lieutenant?"

"I think he lies," the black Mauro replied.

"And so do I. Ho, guard, remove the prisoner. We take him to Daloss with us, for sacrifice upon the golden altar of Erlik."

Warren stared with stupefaction at Ben-Stu's cold and haughty face; and now, behind the still unmistakably Nordic features of this desert chieftain of Mars, Warren discerned the black-eagle expression which would have sat more appropriately on a Mauro of the more common gun-metal skin.

There was nothing which Warren could say or do. Squaring his broad shoulders, and setting his lips to a thin purposeful line, he stared straight at his former friend and ally. Ben-Stu stared back haughtily. Two strong men, standing face to face, each trying to stare the other down.

The blond Mauro's eyes faltered first; and the Earthman, satisfied with this momentary victory, and not wishing to embarrass the other to the point of irretrievable hostility, instantly let his own eyes fall. The forged pass lay crumpled on the ground where Ben-Stu had dropped it after reading it. Warren stooped and picked it up.

"Hey! What are you doing with that?" Ben-Stu demanded.

Warren thrust it into one of the pockets of his ragged tunic. "I intend to keep it until, one day, I can prove to you that this pass is a fake and that therefore I am not in the employ of Ak-Ak."

Ben-Stu's dark lieutenant laughed sneeringly. "So he would prove himself not a liar, by proving himself a forger!"

Then the guards seized Warren and led him away, to bind him hand and foot, and throw him in a tent.

The next day the Mauros broke

camp. Warren was placed astride a slith, his ankles tied beneath the creature's belly, and his wrists tied to the saddle-horn.

It was a familiar road which they traversed; seemingly endless red sand-dunes, finally giving way to hilly slopes. Small squat bushes and sparse blue-knobbed grey lichenous trees. A shrine of black ersite. Rocky slag-bluffs. Beds of salt, weirdly white amid the desert red. They passed the lichen grove where the Legion of Death had been ambushed three years ago, but had won through. The narrow pass through the mighty Fobian range. And then the towering spires and minarets of Daloss, City of Lost Souls, flanked by jagged mountain ranges, and backed by a high plateau, red and barren and forlorn.

AS THE cavalcade trotted up to the fretwork metal gates in the arched doorway of the high red mud wall which encircled the city, Warren's pulses quickened. In spite of the fact that he was being led to slaughter on the golden altar of the black god Erlik, Don Warren's heart sang with home-coming; for at last, after three long years, he was back again in the City of his beloved, the beautiful Esta. Would he see her before he died?

Attendants unbarred the gates and swung them open, and the cavalcade trotted in on their splay-footed gray reptilian steeds. As the slithmen rode down the wide central street of the city, toward the great black dome of the towering Temple of Erlik, Warren craned his neck from side to side, but saw no face that he recognized. Low red-stucco buildings flanked the street on both sides. Mosaics, azure blue and white and turquoise green, sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight. In the doorways, veiled women stared at the





troop, but none of them was Esta. From behind latticed windows, other eyes peered out.

The cavalcade reached the temple walls—high walls of red sandstone, with windowed red towers. And above the wall waved the velvety tops of many blood-green ktath-trees, indicating the vast cool gardens which lay beyond. In the midst of these gardens stood the immense black-plastered temple itself, with its seven rainbow-hued spires, and its great bulbous black dome reaching into the Martian sky.

Through the gateway in the high garden wall they padded, and swung off their saddles in the ktath-tree grove. Warren's ankles were cut free from beneath his slith's belly, his wrists were untied from the saddle-horn, and he was yanked unceremoniously from the

A single shot rang through  
the desert air





beast's back, to fall in a cramped and weary heap on the red sward of the temple garden.

Ben-Stu, his gaudy cape flapping behind him, strode over to his prostrate captive, stared scornfully down on him for a few tense moments, and then prodded him with one sandaled toe. Warren looked up. Weakly he got to his feet, and faced his tormentor.

His eyes flashed. "Ben-Stu," he said scathingly, "I was a fool to trust the likes of you."

Ben-Stu laughed harshly. "Well this is good! The man whom I found I couldn't trust, is complaining that he can't trust me!"

Ruminatively, Warren thought aloud, "I suppose I ought to tell his father, the Chieftain Mu-Lai. If Ben-Stu is loyal, this would do no harm. If he is a traitor, it may do some good."

"N-n, N-n! No good at all," laughed the young Mauro. "For Mu-Lai already knows your yarn in detail—I have recited it to him—did as dramatic a job of it as you did, when telling it to me."

"Esta would believe me," Warren flung back at him.

"Mm. We shall see." And, with that cryptic remark, Ben-Stu motioned to two of his henchmen, dramatically swished the righthand corner of his gaudy cape across his left shoulder, turned, and stalked away toward the looming black temple of the Dark Star. The two guards seized Warren, and hustled him along in the wake of Ben-Stu.

**J**UST within the temple, scene of that well-remembered battle of three years ago, Ben-Stu turned sharply to the left. He extracted a large key from the folds of his desert garments, unlocked a small door, and led the way with surefooted ease down a flight of

stone steps into stygian darkness below. Gusts of dank musty air welled up out of the depths. Stumbling, Warren was pushed along down the stairs and across the cellar pavement, finally to be flung upon the moist floor. He heard a grated door creak shut behind him and the squeaky sound of a key in a rusty lock. Then without a word, Ben-Stu and the two men left Warren to his bitter thoughts.

He had reached Daloss, the City of Lost Souls, the mecca of his desires, the inaccessible place which he had scarcely dared hope ever to revisit. Here he was at last, yet to what end? Back where he had started, about to be roasted alive on the fiery golden altar, as an offering to Erlik.

As Don Warren lay despairing on the slimy stones of his cell, his thoughts turned to the last remark of Ben-Stu before bringing him here. Warren had mentioned that Esta would believe his story, and Ben-Stu had cryptically replied, "We shall see." Did that remark have some hidden meaning?

As if in answer to Warren's unspoken query, footsteps approached in the corridor outside the bars of the cell. Several persons, one of whom was carrying an electrical flashlight, were coming forward. The beam played upon the grated door of the cell, and a man stepped forward, unlocked the door, and swung it open. The person carrying the light entered the cell, halted, and turned the beam full on Warren, who scrambled to his feet and stood blinking.

Then a glad little cry in a well-remembered voice: "Ah! He told me true! For it is the American."

"Esta!" Warren shouted, darting forward, his arms outstretched.

But from behind the girl there came a peremptory "Halt! Lay not profane hands on the daughter of Mu-Lai."



Warren halted. The girl drew near him. But still he could not see her, because of the dazzling beam which she carried.

"Let me see your glorious face," Warren begged.

The light shifted upward and backward, and illumined features even more dazzling than Warren had remembered. Three years had matured and perfected the youthful promise that had been Esta. The pretty girl had become an incomparable woman. Character had molded the softly cameo-cut face into lineaments of a loveliness positively breath-taking.

The azure eyes now possessed a depth of soul. The aureole of golden curls had taken on a copper glint. Warren had thought Esta's beauty unsurpassable, but the girl had now surpassed even herself.

"Beloved!" Warren murmured brokenly.

Esta stepping forward out of earshot of the guards who had accompanied her, whispered back, "Beloved!" Furthermore she spoke in English, though haltingly.

"Then you are still free?" Warren asked.

"Still free, and still yours, beloved—till death us do part."

**D**EATH? The word had an ominous connotation, and Esta had uttered it with a little catch in her silvery voice.

She now continued, with a sob, "And death *is* to part us, beloved. Oh, why did you ally yourself with Ak-Ak, our enemy?"

"I did *not*!" Warren indignantly exclaimed. "Surely *you* do not believe that of me!"

"Ah, I knew it. And I told my father and my brother that you would not side with our enemies—except per-

haps as a pretense, so as to get through their lines and join us. But Ben-Stu still mistrusts you, and has persuaded my father too to mistrust you."

Gradually they had lapsed back into Martian, for more rapid conversation.

"Then why did Ben Stu let you come to me?"

From the darkness behind Esta, in the corridor beyond the cell door, came the answer, in a masculine voice. "It was I—not Ben-Stu—who brought her here."

A swart and dark-skinned young man, with hooked nose, cruel thin lips, and beady black eyes, stepped forward into the light.

"You!" Warren exclaimed, falling back a pace. "You! Ab-Nadik!"

"The same," the man replied, folding his arms, and grinning evilly.

How much of the conversation had Esta's affianced husband heard, Warren wondered.

"But why should *you* bring Esta to see *me*?"

Ab-Nadik's perfect white teeth showed between his barely parted thin lips. "Perhaps so that I could gloat over the two of you. Perhaps because I love Esta so much that I am willing to grant her this favor. Perhaps because I no longer love her. Who knows." He shrugged the narrow shoulders beneath his gaudy cape.

Turning away from Warren, he shouted to the two guards who had come with Esta, "Leave us now. I am not afraid of this Earthman. Besides I am armed." He patted his sides where the butts of two atomic pistols protruded from the top of his pantaloons. The scraping footsteps of the two guards could be heard receding in the distance.

"Now that there is no danger of your being seen," Ab-Nadik continued, "to each other's arms! I, Ab-Nadik,



command it. Kiss each other good-bye."

Eagerly Esta moved forward. But Warren was deterred by suspicion. Why should Esta's betrothed order her into the arms of another man? "So! You wish to gloat over our forlorn leave-taking on the eve of the fiery altar!"

"Not at all! Not at all!" Ab-Nadik replied in an injured tone. "I came here to effect your escape."

"You? Why?"

"Perhaps because I fear you up until the very last moment when the flames of Erlik have taken their toll. Perhaps to demonstrate to Esta how much I love her. Perhaps because I do not love her at all, and so hope that you may return and thus save me from a loveless match. Who knows!" Again he shrugged. "The fact remains that neither Mu-Lai nor Ben-Stu trusts you. Nor can either of them be prevailed upon to spare you. But, make haste, or we may be too late."

THIS time Warren and Esta awaited no further urging, as they clasped each other close, forgetting all in the warm throbbing pressure of each other.

Ab-Nadik's gruff voice brought them back to reality. "Enough! Now, Esta, go. It is sufficient risk that I run, without you being here to complicate it."

The lovers kissed once more—lingeringly. Then Esta departed, her blue eyes gleaming happily. "Till we meet again, beloved," she breathed. "I shall be waiting for you."

"All Mars cannot keep us apart!" Warren shouted after her.

Ab-Nadik produced another light from the folds of his flowing garments. "Come," he commanded. "You have been this way before." There was an undercurrent, as of spite, in his words. He pushed Warren ahead of

him down the corridor, and unlocked a door. The treasure-chamber of Daloss!

As they made their way toward the other end, Warren ran his hand into one of the chests of ancient gold coins.

"No! None of that!" Ab-Nadik snapped.

"Just one as a souvenir. The one which I took the last time was taken from me when Ak-Ak captured me on my way here."

Ab-Nadik's dark eyes narrowed, and he bit his lip. Then forcing a thin smile, he said, "Very well. And, speaking of Ak-Ak, now is the time for a showdown. Are you loyal to Ben-Stu, or to Mars, or to Ak-Ak?"

What should Warren answer? Which answer did Ab-Nadik expect? And what would be the result of each of the three possible replies?

THEN Warren played a hunch. Ben-Stu and Mu Lai believed him allied with Ak-Ak, and this belief was the cause of his present predicament. He might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. So he said slowly, "If I couldn't deceive Ben-stu, there is no hope of deceiving you. Ak-Ak and I are just like that." He held up one hand with the first two fingers intercrossed.

"Prove it!" Ab-Nadik snapped, thereby indicating to Warren that the latter had chosen the right answer.

For reply, Warren produced the crumbled forged pass from one of the pockets of his tattered tunic. Ab-Nadik inspected it carefully by the light of his electric flash.

"Um! Genuine enough," he declared half to himself. "But you lack discretion. You should never have let Ben-Stu see this."

"But I thought that Ak-Ak and he were allies. Even now I don't know what to think."



"Ben-Stu is no ally of Ak-Ak. He was just luring him on. But here's where *I* come into the picture. I *am* an ally of Ak-Ak. Play with me, and you can have your freedom, your revenge on Ben-Stu, and—and—one more reward."

"Of course, I will play with you. You are too generous. What do you wish me to do?"

"Take this note of identification to O-Dom, a desert chief who rules the oasis due west of the pass by which you entered these mountains. He is supposed to be an ally of Daloss. Actually he has teamed up with Ak-Ak. Ak-Ak has entrusted O-Dom with a store of high-explosive uranium, which is to be used to blow up the city walls in an assault on Daloss. Such an attempt, being known to the defenders of this city, will never succeed. So tell O-Dom to use the explosive to block off our water-supply. He will know what I mean."

Warren pricked up his ears. What wouldn't the planetary authorities give for this information! For generations, the source of the water-supply of Daloss had been a mystery. Here is a planet, where rain almost never falls except at the two poles, a planet the entire water-supply of which is derived from the melting of the polar snow-caps, and is carried to all other regions solely by man-made canals. How incongruous, with this set-up, then, is the phenomenon of a city located far from any of the canals, and yet amply supplied with water, in fact even blessed with springs and brooks! How incongruous likewise is the phenomenon of an oasis in the midst of the red desert! Strange that no-one ever mentally linked together these two paradoxes!

Warren's reverie was interrupted by Ab-Nadik thrusting into Warren's face the note which he had written, and ex-

claiming, "Come, come! Wake up!"

**I**NSTANTLY Warren was on the alert. Yet he feigned continued stupefaction, Passing the back of one hand across his eyes with a tired gesture, he said, "Please forgive me, but I am still a bit dizzy from my desert hardships. I'll be all right in a moment. And may I please have my own Ak-Ak pass back, Sir?"

Grudgingly, Ab-Nadik handed it over.

"And now, how do I get to O'Dom's oasis?" Warren asked.

"Follow me!" Ab-Nadik unlocked a door in the farther side of the treasure-chamber and led the way down a long dark winding tunnel, until finally dim moonlight showed ahead through a grating. This grating Ab-Nadik also unlocked. They stepped out into the clear cool Martian night.

A slith was tethered close by—a slith slung with canteen, arms, and desert rations.

"You and I fought each other once before," said Ab-Nadik. "Remember? But there are no hard feelings, for we are allies now." He held out his hand.

"You mentioned a third reward for this alliance—a third reward in addition to my freedom and revenge on Ben-Stu."

Ab-Nadik's teeth flashed. "The third reward is—Esta."

"Esta?" Warren could hardly believe that he had heard aright!

"Yes. Esta. I no longer love her. Since she gave her heart to you three years ago, she has been damaged goods so far as I am concerned. I have dissembled so as to deceive Mu-Lai, her father. But I love another, who will be my queen when I rule over Daloss. Esta will become a mere slave—a play-thing which I can bestow on whomever I choose. She is yours, my friend—



to do with as you wish—you do not even need to marry her!”

“Why — you — beast!” Warren hissed. He wheeled and swung one fist square against the mocking grinning line of teeth that gleamed in the light of the twin moons. Ab-Nadik, defamer of Esta, went out cold.

Warren jerked free the knot that tethered the slith, vaulted into the saddle, and streaked off through the night, with a pad-pad of soft splay hooves.

A sputtered oath behind him apprised him that Ab-Nadik had recovered his wits. The sharp hiss of an atomic blast sped close to Warren's head—Ab-Nadik had opened fire. Warren leaned low over the pommel, his face against the stinking neck of his reptilian mount. Then consciousness dissolved in a burst of pyrotechnic sparks, and he knew no more.

After interminable ages he reopened his eyes. He was lying in thick red moss, and the sun was on the western horizon. Sore and dizzy he staggered to his feet, and felt himself carefully all over. Intact, though his head ached splittingly and the desert all about him seemed to reel and teeter and spin.

No sign anywhere of the slith which had borne him thus far. Well, perhaps he could stagger on through the night toward the oasis of O-Dom, if he but knew where that oasis was.

HE TOOK out the note which Ab-Nadik had given him, and spelled out its pictographs: “This will introduce Wahr-En. His message from me is authentic. He is a gentleman. Ab-Nadik.”

Thrusting it back into his pocket, Warren looked out across the red desert toward the setting sun. To his surprise, he saw mountains there! There should be no mountains to the *westward*. Certainly the slith could not

have carried him unconscious clear through the Fobian Mountains; yet only thus could they now lie to the westward.

Then he noticed that the setting sun was rising in the west. He laughed aloud. It was the *rising* sun—it was rising in the *east*. He had been all turned around!

Now facing to the *true* west, he discerned on the horizon a speck, which might be—must be—an oasis.

Toward it he resolutely set forth across the cool green morning sands.

The sun rose higher. The cool green morning sands became the hot sweltering red sands of noonday. Yet still Don Warren trudged on. The spot on the horizon widened and heightened. It was indeed an oasis. Filled with renewed courage, Warren squared his shoulders, set his jaws, and—made it!

Just before sundown he staggered up to the edges of a community of low stone houses, tents, tilled garden patches, and a few gray lichen-trees growing amid huge boulders and ledges of red sandstone.

A black-skinned hawk-visaged sentinel in shabby dirty desert pantaloons and cape, and armed with a rifle of ancient vintage, halted him on the outskirts of the village.

Warren thrust his hand into his pocket for the note from Ab-Nadik, and came up with the forged Ak-Ak pass. Some sixth sense persuaded him to accept this as an omen. He handed over the forged pass, instead of Ab-Nadik's note.

The sentinel evidently could not read, but the writing appeared to impress him. Motioning Warren to walk ahead, so that he could keep him covered by his ancient weapon, he prodded him toward a nearby stone hut. Here merged a more presentable and intelligent-appearing black-man.



This individual slowly spelled out the pass, then beamed on Warren with a friendly toothy smile.

"Welcome, friend," he said, "but why do you come on foot? And where do you come from?"

"I come from Ab-Nadik of Daloss. My slith threw me, a day's march from here, after I had traveled all night. I must have become sleepy, or I would not have lost control of the beast. Now I am hungry and thirsty, as well as tired. But mostly am I thirsty. And I have an important message for the great, the noble, O-Dom."

WITH simple grace and hospitality, the officer invited Warren to enter his humble quarters, and poured out for him a tall mug of desert wine, surprisingly cool, and not cloying, in spite of its syrupy consistency.

A dirty black servant now brought the evening meal—a sticky bitter-tasting red paste, the staple dish of desert-dwellers, very filling and satisfying.

There followed a smoke—long hollow twigs of gray lichen, stuffed with orra-root tobacco.

Warren sat in the doorway, and puffed away with his friendly desert tribesman, as the green shadows fell over the red expanse of Mars, and cool breezes sprang up among the rocks and lichen-trees, and little bat-lizards flitted to and fro, while the lesser moon hurtled across the sky from west to east, and Warren felt that it wasn't such a bad world after all.

For the first time since his discharge from the penal battalion, he felt a modicum of peace and satisfaction. He had seen his Esta again. She still loved him. And—for the moment—he was safe and free.

In an outpouring of gratitude to the fates, he turned toward his host and exclaimed, "Sir, you are a gentleman!"

The effect of these words was sudden and unexpected. With a scream of rage, his host sprang to his feet, snatched out an atomic pistol, and leveled it at Warren. The man's gun-metal face turned an even darker hue in the pale moonlight. His aquiline features were contorted into a hideous snarl.

"Take that back!" he shrieked, waving his weapon menacingly.

WARREN stumbled to his feet, and staggered backward. "Take what back?" he gasped. "I meant only to compliment you—to pay you a deserved tribute for your hospitality."

His swarthy host lowered the gun. "I forgot that you are an earthman and a city dweller," he said. "Please forgive my outburst."

"But what did I say amiss?" Warren persisted.

The other levelly replied, "To call a desert-dweller a 'gentleman' is a deadly insult. To us, 'gentleman' means a member of the hated red nobility of Mars, who keep us desert-folk from our rightful heritage. We kill all gentlemen."

"I'm sorry," Warren murmured contritely. "I did not know. All that I meant was that you have been most kind and courteous to me."

And then, as they resumed their seats and lit two more long lichen cigarettes, Warren's mind suddenly flashed back to the note which Ab-Nadik had given him: "This will introduce Wahr-En. His message from me is authentic. He is a gentleman."

So *that* was it! Instructions to O-Dom to accept the message about dynamiting the water supply, but to kill the bearer. Ab-Nadik *did* love Esta after all, and was taking this means to "kill two bat-lizards with one stone," i. e.: get a message to O-Dom, and rid himself of a rival. How fortunate that



Warren had shown instead the forged pass from Ak-Ak!

But now, what was he to show to O-Dom? The pass itself might do to satisfy this simple guileless black man with whom Warren now sat smoking, but it would hardly suffice such a wily desert chieftain as O-Dom.

His host cut in on his thoughts with, "O-Dom is not here this evening. Sleep in my humble house, and I will lead you to him on the morrow."

Anything to postpone the reckoning, thought Warren, eagerly assenting. Soon he was curled up on sleeping rugs spread on a pile of fragrant lichen-twigs.

He cudgeled his brains for some solution of what to say to O-Dom on the morrow, but no thoughts came. And the next thing that he knew, it was morning.

After breakfast—the same pungent red paste—his host led him to a large sandstone hut in the center of the village. A mangy sentinel paced up and down in front of the door. To the sentinel, the man explained who Warren was; then left him, stating that he had duties to perform, but would see him later.

The sentinel ushered Warren inside into what appeared to be an office of sorts, and told him to sit down and wait. The Chief would be there presently.

A STYLUS on the table gave Warren a sudden idea. The Martian symbol for "one" lacks but a single pencil-stroke of being the Martian symbol for "none." In an instant he had altered the fatal message from Ab-Nadik to O-Dom by the addition of that single stroke. Its concluding sentence now read: "He is *no* gentleman." O-Dom would take that to mean that Warren, in spite of being a city feller, was okeh.

A black man, in clean white blouse

and pantaloons, a gaudily striped cape, and wide desert hat, stalked into the room. His face, though haughty, seemed not overly intelligent.

"I am O-Dom," he stated loudly. "Who are you, Earthman?"

"I am Wahr-En, a former prisoner of the hated aristocrats. I bear a message from your friend and ally, Ab-Nadik of Daloss." He handed over the recently altered note.

O-Dom read it slowly. "And what is the message which my friend has entrusted to you? It must be indeed important, that he trusts it not to paper."

What was Warren to give as the message? Certainly he did not wish to be a party to cutting off the water-supply from the city of his Esta. Why hadn't he thought up some substitute message, all this while?

Slowly and haltingly he began, "Ab-Nadik says that you have just received a shipment of high-explosive uranium isotope from Colonel Ak-Ak. Ab-Nadik wishes me to take that shipment—and—"

"Well?" O-Dom's shoe-button eyes narrowed and bored into Warren.

This would never do. Suddenly the inspiration came. Warren had found the solution of his difficulties. He would prevent, rather than carry out, Ab-Nadik's plan. He would secure the explosive on a pretext, and then destroy it. He threw his head back, breathed deeply, and smiled.

"As I was saying when you interrupted me," he continued with dignity, "Ab-Nadik wishes *me* to take the explosive, and blow up the water-supply of Daloss. You are to show me where, but I am to do the deed."

"But what about the original plan of using the explosive in an assault on the walls?"

"Ab-Nadik is convinced that you



can never reach the walls. The mountain pass is manned, for Mu-Lai expects an attack. Why expose yourself and your men to slaughter, when thirst will lay low the mighty city of Daloss."

The black man pursed his lips ruminatively. "An excellent plan! The plan of a genius! I will do it!"

He clapped his hands. An attendant entered.

"Get Rah-Tray," he commanded, "and send him here with the explosive."

THE attendant departed. O-Dom motioned Warren to a stool, and handed him a lichen cigaret. As they smoked and waited, O-Dom rapidly sketched to Warren the plans for the seizure of Daloss. Ak-Ak was due to arrive any day now, with his renegade Martian troops and thousands of desert tribesmen whom he had been gathering. The desert-dwellers had long been jealous of their brethren in the snug city of Daloss. No longer would Daloss lord it over them. Daloss and all its riches would be looted.

The rebels had depended upon treachery within Daloss to help them. Now the traitor had turned traitor—Ben-Stu had proved loyal to his father after all. But fortunately this defection had brought them a new ally, Ab-Nadik, who planned to rule over the ruins of Daloss, with Mu-Lai's daughter Esta as his queen.

O-Dom babbled on, as Warren secretly clenched his hands at the impious thought.

A fierce hook-nosed young Mauro stalked in and saluted. "The squad is ready, Sire."

"Rah-Tray," O-Dom announced, "this is Wahr-En, an emissary of Ab-Nadik. Take him and the explosive to the springs. Properly placed, the explosive will cause all of Daloss to

die of thirst." His dark eyes gleamed evilly at the thought of so much suffering. "And now, Wahr-En, go. And may Erlik go with you."

Warren saluted. "The same to you, Sir." But in his mind, he reversed the thought, so that it became: "To Erlik with all of you."

Warren stepped outside. To his consternation, he noted that Rah-Tray had with him a score or more of black warriors. One was carrying a small box—the explosive evidently.

"Hand it over!" Warren demanded.

But Rah-Tray shook his head. "We shall carry it for you," he replied. "Follow me."

He led the way up onto one of the ledges of red rock, and down through a cleft. Torches were produced and lighted. Far down in the cavern below them could be heard the hollow drip and lapping of water.

"At this spot seeps the leakage from the great canal," said Rah-Tray. "Here we draw the water for our crops and our sustenance. And from here runs an underground river, straight to Daloss. I think that *I* know better than you do, Earthman, just where to set off the blast that will seal the tunnel."

"The request from Ab-Nadik, concurred in by O-Dom, was that *I* was to have the honor."

"You shall have the *honor*—all in due time—but I shall name the place. Did not O-Dom say that I was to guide you. No city-dweller before you has ever even known the secret of the water supply of Daloss and of this oasis. I think it was a great mistake to let even you know."

THEY had by now come within sight of the subterranean stream. Warren would have to act quickly if he was to save Daloss—if he was to save even himself.



"Just a minute, Rah-Tray," he said, walking up to the other. Then suddenly, "Look out behind you!"

It was an old gag, but evidently a new one on Mars, or at least in this primitive community. As Rah-Tray instinctively wheeled around, Warren reached out with both hands and snatched the two atomic pistols from the waist-band of Rah-Tray's pantaloons. Backing quickly away, he covered the group with a sweep of his weapons.

With a cry of surprise the man who was carrying the small box of uranium isotope, let it fall as he raised his hands aloft. Mercifully it did not explode.

"Back! Up the cavern!" Warren shouted.

For reply, a sizzling ray of flame stabbed down through the flickering darkness, grazing Warren's left shoulder with a searing pain. An answering flash from one of his own weapons laid his assailant low. The other desert men turned and bolted up the cavern.

But, instead of leaving, they took refuge behind projections on either side, a short distance away. Warren too dropped behind a sheltering ledge.

For some time they sniped at one another with atomic weapons, aiming at each other's flashes.

Then came a shout from the entrance of the cave, rolling through the air, "Colonel Ak-Ak has arrived. He says that the Earthmen is an imposter, and must be captured at all costs."

"Don't I know it!" Ray-Tray sang back. "Come on men, let's rush him."

Out from behind their protecting rocks the desert men poured. One of Warren's weapons went dead. How many blasts remained in the other he could not know. But he did know that he was about to be overpowered by sheer weight of numbers. Not only was he confronted by the original

squad, but other tribesmen, carrying torches and atomic rifles were pouring into the cavern.

One of the vanguard tripped over the little box of uranium, and fell, cursing.

Why not? Taking careful aim, Warren poured a steady stream of concentrated atomic force into the box of explosive.

A CURTAIN of blasting fire choked the entire cavern in front of him. With a deafening crash, the air, the rocks above, below him, and on each side swept back to engulf him. The fiery wall receded, as Warren was wafted into nothingness.

Space closed in on him, wetly, coldly, oppressively. He could not breathe. He was under water—water which was buffeting him, tumbling him head over heels.

Instinct led him to hold his breath—though his lungs were bursting—to strike out with arms and legs, to try to swim.

His head cleaved the surface in stygian darkness. He drew a deep tortured breath, only to suck in a choking mouthful of water as a foaming wave struck him in the face.

Sinking once more, Warren cleared his lungs. Then he shot high in air amid the whirlpool eddies—high enough to breathe a full breath before dropping back again.

So he struggled on. The torrent roared. It dashed him against sharp rocks, first on one side, then on the other. Gradually he weakened.

Light showed ahead. Was it the end of the tunnel? Open air once more?

Now he could dimly see his surroundings. There seemed to be a shore, a ledge, along the left bank of this subterranean stream. Diffused sunlight



filtered down through a shaft from above.

Then darkness once more, as the swift current swirled him along. Limp and almost unresisting, Warren was hurled head-foremost against one wall of the cave, and knew no more.

Was this death? A soft fragrant bed cradling his aching limbs. Tender hands soothing his fevered brow. A silvery voice crooning to him.

He opened his eyes. Esta's golden-framed face smiled solicitously down at him.

"Oh, my beloved," she breathed, "you came back to me. I knew you would."

Just outside the room were other voices, harsh voices.

The stern tones of Mu-Lai, saying, "Ab-Nadik insists that he die, my son. You yourself brought him here to kill him. What has changed your mind?"

The equally stern tones of Ben-Stu, saying, "We shall see."

Frantically Esta flung her arms around him, crying, "They shall not have you, my beloved. You are mine. I found you in the well, when I went with the other maidens to draw water. No one was supposed to know that you are here."

Raising himself on his elbow, and gently disengaging himself from the entwining arms of the girl, Warren called, "Oh, Ben-Stu, Mu-Lai, come hither, quickly."

THE dark regal hawk-nosed chief-tain and his blond son stalked into the room.

"At last I can prove my loyalty," Warren asserted. He produced the note which Ab-Nadik had given him, soggy and almost a pulp, but still legible. "I changed a 'gentleman' to read 'no gentleman'," he explained. "Ab-Nadik wished me killed after I had delivered

the message. Oh—and by the way—I punched his face just before I left here. He had insulted Esta."

Ben-Stu grinned his old-time grin. "So that's where he got his split lip. Said he ran against a door in the dark. But I wondered."

But Mu-Lai's face darkened. "And what *was* Ab-Nadik's message—and to whom?" he incisively demanded.

"It was to O-Dom, to blow up the water-supply of Daloss."

Ben-Stu too darkened, "And you delivered that message?"

"Certainly."

The two Mauros faced each other with narrowed eyes. "He dies," they declared in unison.

"No! No!" Esta shrieked, flinging her arms around Warren again.

"Look here!" Warren exclaimed angrily, "I set off the explosive myself. Your water-supply is still intact. In fact," rather ruefully, "I believe that I came down it myself. And, I rather think—at least that's what I tried to do—that I cut off O-Dom's water-supply instead."

Suddenly a look of comprehension flashed across Ben-Stu's boyish face. "Quick father! While we stand stupidly here, questioning the good faith of a loyal friend and ally, that traitor Ab-Nadik is undoubtedly making his getaway."

Mu-Lai gave his son one long startled look. Then the two of them dashed from the room.

Warren tried to rise and follow, but fell back exhausted upon the pillows.

After all it was sweeter to lie there and be ministered unto by Esta.

LATER Mu-Lai and Ben-Stu returned to report ruefully that Ab-Nadik had made a clean getaway on a swift slith.

Warren, by now somewhat rested



and refreshed, told all that he knew of the plans for the attack.

Thus forewarned, the forces of Daloss, manned passes; but were gradually driven back. Ak-Ak had rounded up too many jealous desert blacks. The siege of Daloss began in dead earnest.

Before falling back behind their almost impregnable city walls, the denizens of Daloss harvested or destroyed all crops in the surrounding hemmed-in mountain valley.

Daloss was prepared to withstand a long siege. The enemy had to bring their supplies from afar. They possessed no cannon, nor bombing planes—in fact cannon were unknown on Mars, being unnecessary on a planet which (at least nominally) was under one government. And no planes (nor even rocket ships) dared traverse the gusty heights of the Fobian Mountains.

But, unless aid came, Daloss must eventually fall. And from whom could aid come? Not from the desert tribes, which had all turned against their erstwhile Capitol. Nor from the government, which was unaware that Colonel Ak-Ak was operating without their sanction and against their interests.

Something must be done to break the siege. But what?

"If we could only get a small force through the enemy," Ben-Stu mused, "we might possibly be able to sever their lines of communication."

"I wonder if we could go back up the underground river along which I made my escape," suggested Don Warren, now fully recovered from his harrowing ordeal.

"To what use? You reported that you blew up and closed the only other entrance to the caves."

Suddenly Warren remembered something. "There was another entrance," he declared excitedly. "I remembered a light above the river at one spot, just

before I lost consciousness. It can't be far distant from here, for the light seemed to come from a break high up in the mountains. And, Ben-Stu, the mountains do not extend far eastward from this city."

The Mauro nodded comprehension.

JUST before daybreak one morning, a hundred of the bravest and youngest of the Mauro warriors set out, headed by Don Warren and Ben-Stu. All were clad in red blouses, pantaloons and broad sun-hats, the color of the red sands of Mars.

They arrived at the watering-place of the city. No cave apparently led into or out of the wells of Daloss. But here the current of the stream was not swift. Warren, hatless, with a long rope tied around his body beneath his shoulders, plunged into the icy waters and swam submerged up the subterranean stream.

Finally his head cleared the surface in absolute darkness. He held onto the rocky side of the channel and gave two tugs on the rope—the prearranged signal that all was well. Then he took out an electric torch wrapped in oiled parchment, undid the wrappings, and played the light about.

He saw a wide ledge of rock beside the spot where he clung dripping wet. Pulling himself up onto it, he signalled again. Then slowly but surely he hauled Ben-Stu through to join him.

Time and again the two men let the rope trail off into the dark depths of the subterranean stream, and then hauled it back again with one of their party clinging to its end.

After several hours, the full hundred—soaked to the skin—stood on the rocky ledge. The last rope-load carried the broad sun-hats of the party. They then set out, cautiously marching upstream. The ledge persisted until



they saw light ahead, when they reached the shaft which Warren had passed in his mad swirling stream-swept journey. Up this natural chimney, they scrambled, and finally stood at the summit.

To the eastward they could just barely discern the black tip of the Temple of Erlik in the city from which they had come. To the westward spread the vast expanse of the red desert of Mars.

Creeping to the edge of the peak, they peered over. An unscalable precipice, but not much over a hundred feet deep. The rope which had led them safely through the water caves was long enough to reach twice to the red sands below.

There were no signs of the enemy—all were evidently in the valley of Daloss and in the pass which led to it. So tying two reaches of the rope firmly to sharp projections at the top of the cliff, they lowered themselves over the edge one by one, and went down the ropes hand over hand. One man remained behind above, to cut the ropes free, and stand watch, and finally return to Daloss through the caves to report to Mu-Lai on the progress of the expedition.

Creeping inconspicuously along the foot of the towering red cliffs, the rest set out southward toward the cleft in the rocks which led toward Daloss.

**J**UST within the pass they found hundreds of sliths, belonging to the invading army, guarded by a mere handful of dozing sentinels.

Unseen as yet, the forces of Ben-Stu and Warren divided the guards between them, a dozen or so drawing a bead on each guard. Then at a signal, atomic force blazed suddenly forth from all their weapons. The poor guards never knew they were hit.

Instantly the Mauros rushed in. Each man saddled and bridled a slith. They cut the rest loose from their picket-lines, and herded them out across the plain.

But evidently they had not captured all the enemy mounts, for soon twice their number of Ak-Ak's renegade Martian cavalry came charging out in pursuit.

"Shall we fight or flee?" asked Ben-Stu, spurring his lumbering reptilian steed up beside Don Warren.

"If we flee," the American replied, "we'll have all these fellows to cope with, plus whoever is left at the oasis. Let's *pretend* to flee, send the unsaddled sliths ahead with just a squad of herders, and then suddenly turn on our pursuers."

"Agreed," Ben-Stu shouted. Quickly gathering his men around him, he explained the tactics.

The riderless beasts were herded ahead. The riders gradually fell behind. Consequently the enemy easily overtook them. Suddenly Ben-Stu's forces wheeled, and charged straight at the oncoming enemy cavalry.

At such close quarters, rifles—even atomic pistols—were ineffective. Ben-Stu's men had no spears nor sabers, customary weapons of these wild desert fighters. But the sheer force of their charge bore down the enemy—crumpled them back upon themselves.

And, in the confusion, Mauro after Mauro snatched a weapon which some luckless enemy cavalryman was trying to draw. Then it was cut and slash, cut and slash. Ak-Ak's men, still outnumbering Ben-Stu's, but depleted in weapons, tried to form their ranks in battle array.

But they never recovered from the confusion of that first unexpected assault. They broke rapidly and streamed out across the desert, back



toward the Fobian Range. The Mauros, halting and taking careful aim, poured atomic death into the fleeing enemy.

Finally all wounded sliths of both sides, and all wounded men of Ak-Ak's cavalry were put out of their misery. A squad was left to round up such of the riderless mounts as were still unharmed by the battle, and to bring on the Mauro wounded.

THE rest of the Mauros set out at an easy pad-footed lope across the red sands toward the spot where lay the oasis of O-Dom. The first brush with the enemy had been a success, although nearly half of their brave little Mauro band had perished.

Early in the afternoon the cavalcade reached the oasis. But this formerly fertile spot now lay parched and brown. The tents were gone. The buildings seemed deserted.

"You evidently did a thorough job with your explosion, Warren," Ben-Stu somewhat bitterly remarked. "I had counted on getting food and water here for ourselves and our sliths. I had assumed that this oasis would be a stopping point for the supply trains of our enemies. Here I had planned to waylay those supply trains."

"Look," Warren replied, pointing to a small garden-bed alongside one of the buildings. "There must be *some* water here, and the inhabitants have not been gone for long. This bed has been recently watered."

Standing up in his stirrups and facing around, Ben-Stu shouted, "Ho, men! Dismount, and tether the sliths. Then proceed warily to search the buildings one by one. This may be an ambush."

Warren, taking a squad, made for the headquarters-building of O-Dom. The door stood ajar, and creaked as it teetered almost imperceptibly in a slight

desert breeze. Warren stepped cautiously inside, and paused for his eyes to become accustomed to the change from the desert glare. Warily he peered around behind the door—no-one there.

But from behind him—neither he nor any of his followers could ever explain where the man came from—the hard round end of an atomic pistol was poked into his ribs, and a harsh voice growled, "Hands up—and no crraat-business!"

Up slowly went Warren's hands. A touch on one shoulder forced him around to face out through the doorway.

The voice continued, "One move from any of you men of Daloss, and your leader dies. And now, my own men, come out of the shadows and disarm the invaders."

"Ab-Nadik!" exclaimed one of Warren's Mauros. So that was who it was! Ab-Nadik, the renegade, now allied with the enemies of his own city.

A dozen or so desert Mauros crowded out of the doorway. Warren's men stood irresolute. Ben-Stu hurried up, attracted by the commotion.

"Stand back," Ab-Nadik warned him, "or I'll blast your friend!"

"And then what?" Ben-Stu coolly replied. "If you kill Wahr-En, you will no longer have any threat to hold over us, and we can then mow down you and your desert crraats. So—"

"Just a moment!" Warren hastily interposed. "Ben-Stu, listen intently to what I am going to say—" He paused. He could feel Ab-Nadik grow tense and expectant behind him.

WHEELING suddenly, Warren brushed aside the muzzle of the weapon by the turn of his body. The weapon blazed, sending a searing pain through Warren's side. But, gritting his teeth, he planted his right fist with



every bit of force left in him, squarely against the point of Ab-Nadik's jaw.

A second sizzle of atomic fire shot past Warren, and Ab-Nadik's dead form slumped to the floor in the doorway.

Ben-Stu thrust his pistol back into the waistband of his red pantaloons, as he held out one hand to Warren, with his old-time quizzical grin. "Shake," he said, "We coordinated that, like clockwork. Hurt badly?"

Warren shook his head.

A sizzle of atomic fire from both sides. Two men of Daloss, and every one of Ab-Nadik's desert henchmen went down.

"Water! Water!" moaned one of the wounded.

"What do you mean, water?" sneered one of the men of Daloss, striding over to him, and drawing a sword to give him the coup de grace.

"Just a moment!" Warren interposed. "There is water here. If he will show us where it is, let's spare his life."

Haltingly the dying man of the desert gave directions to a well in the rocks, from which a scant supply of water was obtained. A thorough search of the oasis rounded up enough food for all the men and beasts.

Then a lookout reported, "A caravan approaches from the west."

"Ah!" Warren remarked. "Food and ammunition for the beseigers. We are just in time to waylay it, and destroy the supplies. Then the seige must fail."

A second lookout reported, "But cavalry approach from the direction of Daloss."

Ben-Stu and Warren hastened to the east edge of the oasis.

"It must be the whole main body of Ak-Ak's government command," Ben-Stu wryly observed. "Perhaps we shall *not* succeed in waylaying the caravan

after all. Ho, men! Bring in all the sliths, and conceal them in the center of the oasis, then conceal yourselves in the stone houses and rock ledges at the east side of the oasis, and withhold your fire until you can make every blast tell. Erlik willing, we may yet drive Ak-Ak's cowardly hordes before the caravan gets here."

"Not so cowardly!" Warren remarked. "A large part of that outfit is the Interplanetary Legion, in which I once served."

"If they are like you, my brother, we are indeed up against tremendous odds," Ben-Stu grudgingly admitted.

**T**HERE were two or three thousand men in the approaching cavalry. They drew rein just beyond atomic range, and Colonel Ak-Ak at their head shouted for Ab-Nadik.

No answer.

"Who is there?"

Still no answer.

A small detachment galloped up to reconnoiter. The defenders loosed every blast in their possession, and the detachment recoiled in disorder.

A conference among the attackers ensued. Of course Colonel Ak-Ak could not know how many men of Daloss there were; and doubtless the cavalry which Ben-Stu and Warren had defeated en route to here, had exaggerated tenfold or one hundredfold the number of those who had defeated them.

While the conference out on the red sands of the desert was in progress, a lookout from the other side of the oasis reported to Ben-Stu, "The caravan is not a caravan, Sire. It consists of thousands of government troops."

"We are licked," groaned the young Mauro chieftain.

"Licked nothing!" Warren exclaimed. "We're going out to meet them."



"Oh, so you would turn me in to the Martian authorities?" Ben-Stu sneered surprisingly.

"Look here!" Warren exclaimed exasperated. "You and I have kept alternately trusting and mistrusting each other since we first met each other. Yet always each of us has found the other worthy of trust. Unless we stick together now, all is lost. Come on!"

Ben-Stu sighed. "All right, Warren. I might as well be hung for a slith as a crraat. Lead on!" To his men, he commanded, "Hold out at all costs until we return."

Taking two sliths from the center of the oasis, the two friends trotted out onto the desert to the eastward. Behind them, on the other side of the oasis, they could hear the sizzle and zip, the shouts and cries and groans, of the start of the battle.

In a few minutes they reached the head of the approaching column, and held up their right hands in the sign of peace.

The leader of the government troops was a handsome young red Martian, wearing the insignia of Colonel of the Imperial Army.

"We are Ben-Stu, son of Mu-Lai of Daloss; and Donald Warren, Earthman, formerly a Sergeant of the Interplanetary Legion." Warren announced.

The Martian Colonel scowled at the mention of the dread Mu-Lai. Then replied, "And I am Ed-Garth, Governor General of this desert and of the Fobian Mountains."

"An empty title," Ben-Stu sneered. "We Mauros do not recognize—."

"Pipe down, for Heav— for Erlik's sake," Warren interrupted. Then, "Colonel, you are just in time to perfect that empty title." Rapidly he sketched the situation—how Ak-Ak, using government troops to further his own ambitions, had stirred up the wild desert

tribes for an unauthorized war on Daloss.

Colonel Ed-Garth's keen mind worked with steel-trap speed and precision. "And if I intervene, what?" he snapped.

"Free entry into Daloss." Ben-Stu's quick reply surprised even himself.

The Colonel hesitated only a moment.

"Come on, men!" he shouted to his staff. "Column follow at a slow gallop." Then he, Ben-Stu and Warren streaked off at full speed to circle the oasis.

THEY found the cavalry of Colonel Ak-Ak just forming for what was to be the final overwhelming assault on the handful of Mauro defenders. A big cheer went up from Ak-Ak's men at the prospect of reinforcements.

But Ak-Ak's own gross red face went pale. Ed-Garth rode up to him, pointed one lean red hand at him, and shouted, "Ak-Ak, you are relieved of your command! I place you under arrest for high treason."

"By what authority?" Ak-Ak shouted back. "You are only a Colonel, the same as I am. I wouldn't be surprised if I outrank you." Truculently he twirled one of his long moustachios with his left hand. Under cover of this gesture, he snatched an atomic pistol from his belt and leveled it at the Governor General.

A sizzling spurt of atomic fire! But it was not from the weapon of Ak-Ak. Instead it was from the gun of Ben-Stu, who had drawn his weapon just a shade ahead of Ak-Ak. Ak-Ak pitched headlong from his saddle onto the red sands.

A menacing growl rose from the serried ranks of his men. But Ed-Garth, sitting proudly erect on his slith, spurred up to them, pointing dramatically with one index finger toward the



insignia of rank on his military tunic.

The soldiers cringed and subsided, as Ed-Garth's own outfit galloped up.

Turning to Ben-Stu, Ed-Garth acknowledged, "Chief, you saved my life just now. If I had any doubts as to you, they are dissolved. Lead on to Daloss."

The cool green shadows were falling over the foothills of the mighty Fobian Mountains, as the government troops and the survivors of the expedition from Daloss late that day entered the pass which led to the gates of the City of Lost Souls.

At the head rode Ben-Stu, Don Warren, Governor General Ed-Garth, and the latter's staff.

"We've got all the desert tribes hemmed in between us and the walls of Daloss," hopefully suggested a staff-officer. "Now is our chance to wipe them out."

But Ben-Stu emphatically interposed, "No! If there is to be peace from now on between Mars and my people, it must embrace *all* of my people, even including those who mistakenly were induced to rebel against the leadership of my father."

"So be it," Colonel Ed-Garth replied. "Tell them to lay down their arms, and they will be spared."

"They will *keep* their arms!" Ben-Stu incisively declared.

Acting through officers of the outfit which had formerly been Ak-Ak's, he summoned the chieftains of the various tribes from their campfires, and curtly informed them that the war was over, that Daloss had won, with the aid of Imperial Mars, and that, if they did not create any further disturbance, they could depart in peace.

Satisfied, the chieftains agreed.

**T**HEN Ben-Stu, Warren and Ed-Garth and their retinue pressed on

to the walls of Daloss.

In spite of the young Mauro's hail, the sentinels on the wall refused to open the gates. "How do we know, oh Ben-Stu, that you are not under compulsion?"

"Quite true," Ben-Stu observed aside to Ed-Garth. "Well, I guess I'll have to go inside alone and convince them."

"And how am I to know that, once inside, you will not defy me?" Ed-Garth pointedly asked. "Even now, this very minute, your men and the desert tribesmen whom you have just pardoned may be manning the heights to ambush us."

It was a plausible suggestion. Warren stared inquiringly at his friend.

But Ben-Stu exploded, "I have had enough of trust and distrust. Eh, Wahr-En?"

Warren nodded.

"Very well," Ed-Garth replied with narrowed eyes and drawn lips. "I'll take a chance. We can make a fight of it if there is treachery." He gave the signal to back up; and Ben-Stu, Don Warren and their red-clad men trotted up alone to the city gates. The portals opened, and the delegation passed inside.

Hawk-nosed Mu-Lai was waiting for them. Warmly he embraced his son, who quickly sketched the situation. Mu-Lai at first emphatically demurred against giving-up the traditional isolation of Daloss, but the prospect of being recognized as the unquestioned head of all the Mauros, with official government support, finally convinced him.

"Yes, I suppose it is for the best," he grudgingly admitted. "Let them enter."

The gates opened once more, and Ben-Stu and Don Warren galloped their sliths back to the Martian column.

"Are you game to enter alone into the City of Lost Souls?" Ben-Stu asked



with a twinkle in his eyes. "For of course until the treaty with the Imperial Council is negotiated and signed, we cannot admit such a vast concourse of government troops."

Colonel Ed-Garth grinned also. For answer, he drove his spurs into his slith. The three men entered the city. The gates closed behind them, and they dismounted.

Haughtily regal Mu-Lai approached and was introduced. A torchlit crowd gathered.

"I never thought to meet the great Mu-Lai face to face," Ed-Garth declared respectfully.

Warren spied Esta in the crowd, and hastened to her side. Their arms intertwined, they stood and watched the

parley.

Mu-Lai was saying, "General, you are the first outsider ever to enter this sacred city of Erlik—and live. Unbelievers always perish on the golden altar in the Temple of the Dark Star. I hope you appreciate the honor of being the first exception."

"Why!" Esta indignantly exclaimed, snuggling close to Warren, "He forgets *you*, my beloved."

"A good idea," Warren replied, as he led her away into the darkness. "Let's hope that they all forget the both of us for a few minutes, so that we can be alone together at last, after all these years."

He kissed her, sweetly and softly.

THE END

## ★ SHEEP-EATING PARROT ★

By DAN BURKE

**I**F A man gets hungry enough he'll eat many things that would ordinarily prove distasteful to him. He might even resort to cannibalism as several starving explorers have been known to do. Once well fed again, however, man will go back to his customary eating habits. Naturalists have likewise learned that most animals will react like man to hunger. Animals may temporarily change their eating habits in the face of extreme hunger to return to normal after their hunger is satisfied. But the kea, a New Zealand parrot, has learned to eat meat and still likes it.

When the kea was first discovered in 1856, he was eking out a living in the southern part of New Zealand where the country was mountainous and barren. Gobbling and grubbing about, the kea managed to survive in small numbers on vegetable matter, insects, and worms. Shortly after settlers came to the island, sheep ranching became the principal oc-

cupation and vast flocks soon roamed the countryside.

Not waiting for an invitation, the keas went to work on the sheep. As early as 1867 wounds were found in the loins of many sheep of Otago Province and in some cases even the entrails were seen hanging grotesquely from the ripped sides of the abdomen. It took investigators almost a year to discover that a harmless looking parrot was doing all the damage.

The keas lived a lush existence on their unusual diet and they multiplied and extended their depredations to new territories every time a new sheep range was opened. Luckily for the keas, nature lovers soon learned that this carnivorous habit was learned rather than inherited. The parrot was otherwise harmless. To stop the keas New Zealanders paid special attention to sick sheep and immediately removed carcasses from the open range so that the parrots would have less opportunity to acquire their contorted taste.